THE HISTORY OF

ROCK

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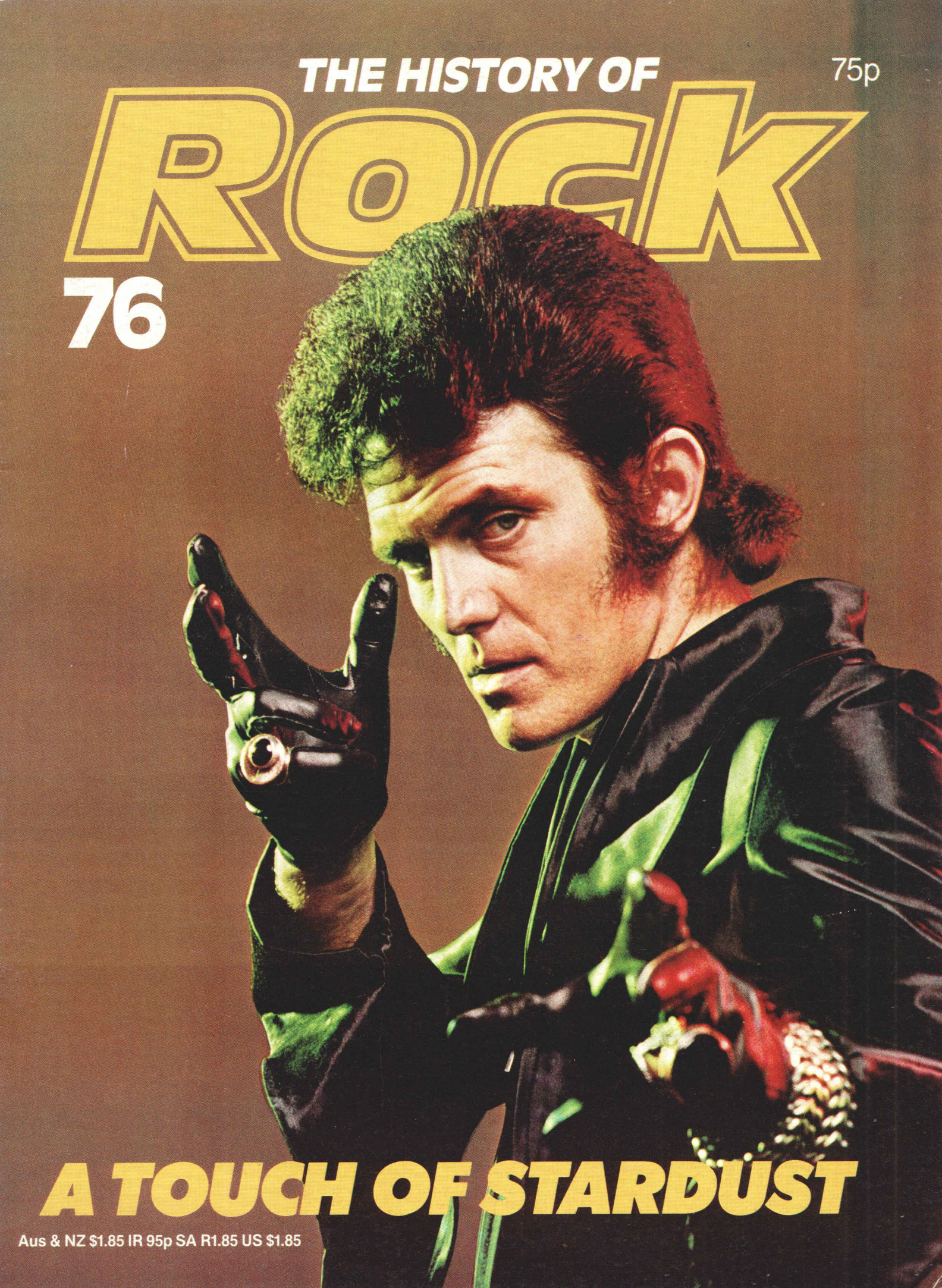

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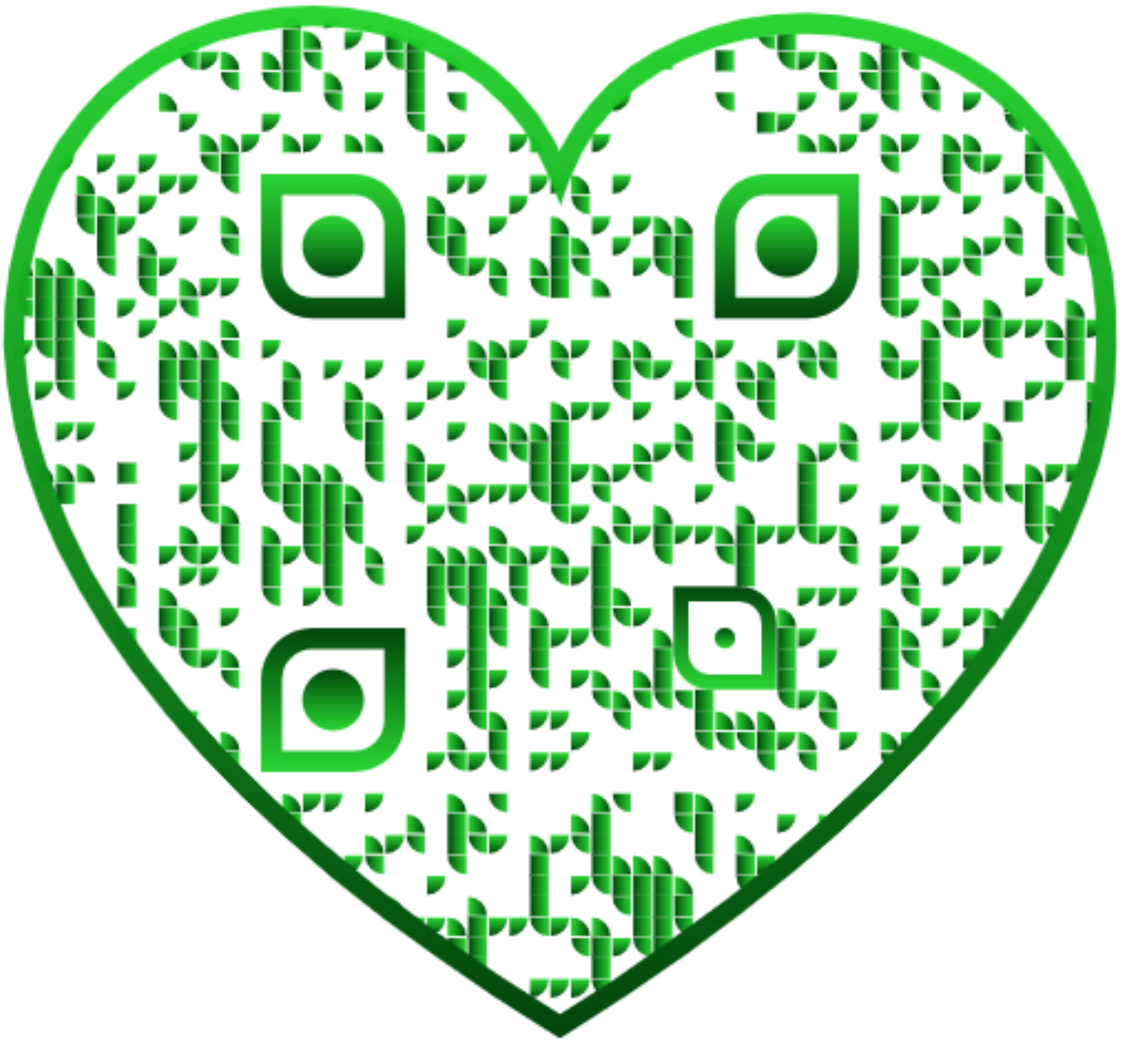
Aus & NZ $1.85 IR 95p SA R1.85 US $1.85



THE HISTORY OF ROCK

Published weekly by Orbis Publishing Limited
Orbis House, 20/22 Bedfordbury, London WC2N 4BT

Volume 7 Issue 76

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Acknowledgements

Andre Csillag 1508, 1514(B), 1519(B); **London Features International** 1501(T), 1502, 1503, 1504, 1506, 1507, 1509, 1510, 1511, 1512(T), 1513, 1514(T), 1517, 1520; **LFI/Mike Putland** Cover, 1515, 1519(T); **Barry Plummer** 1501(B), 1512(B); **Rex Features** 1516, 1518, 1519(B); **Star File/Bob Gruen** 1505(B). Photographic retouching by **Roy Flooks.** Discographies compiled by **Tom Hibbert.**

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A fascination with experimentation was a key characteristic of the late Sixties music scene. As musicians and audiences grew more sophisticated, a generation of rock artists, inspired by the innovations of Miles Davis, looked to jazz for fresh inspiration. Brass sections became the latest thing, bringing huge success to bands such as Blood, Sweat and Tears and Chicago, while the Mahavishnu Orchestra and Weather Report genuinely expanded musical horizons.

The History of Rock Price U.K. 75p I.R. 95p Aus. & N.Z. $1.85 S.A. R1.85 U.S.A. $1.85.

How to obtain copies of The History of Rock Copies are obtainable by placing a regular order at your newsagent or by taking out a subscription. **Subscription rates:** For six months (26 issues) £23.00; for one year (52 issues) £46.00. Send your order and remittance to Rock Subscriptions, Punch Subscriptions Services, Watling Street, Bletchley, Milton Keynes, Bucks MK2 2BW., being sure to state the number of the first issue required.

Back numbers **U.K. & Eire:** Back Nos. are obtainable from your newsagent or from **History of Rock** Back Nos. Orbis Publishing Ltd., 20/22 Bedfordbury, London WC2N 4BT at cover price. **Australia:** Back Nos. are obtainable from **The History of Rock** Back Nos., Gordon and Gotch (Aus) Ltd, 114 William Street, PO Box 767G, Melbourne, Vic 3001. **New Zealand, South Africa, Europe & Malta:** Back Nos. are available at cover price from your newsagent. In case of difficulty write to the address in your country given for binders. South African readers should add sales tax.

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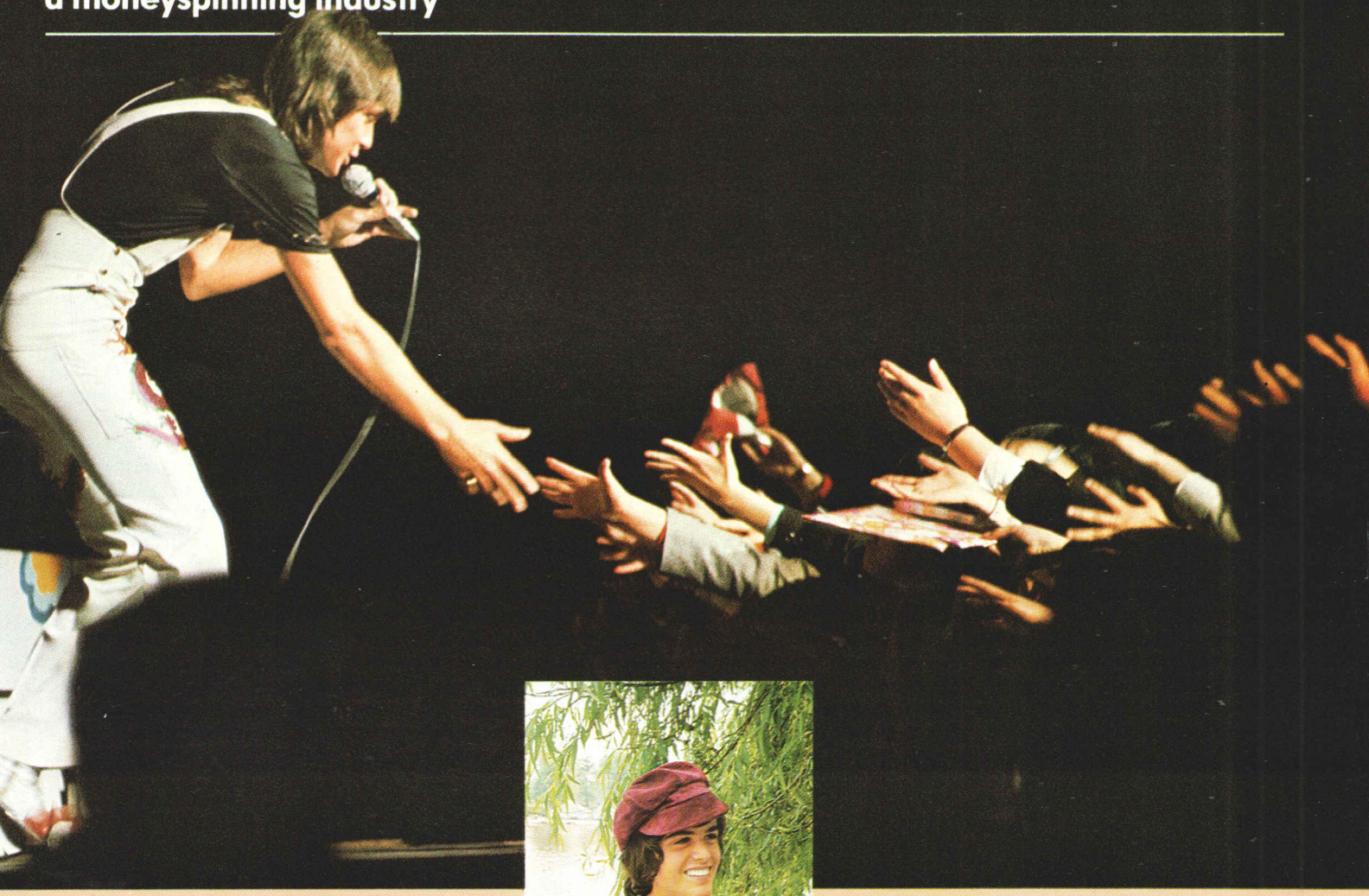
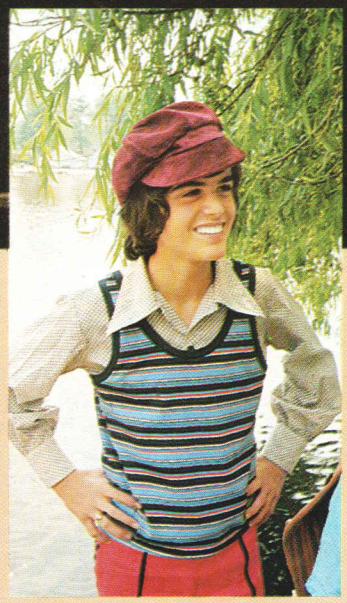
Gonna Make You a Star

Manufacturing pop idols became a moneyspinning industry





David Cassidy (top) and Donny Osmond (above) were both sold as clean-living American boys-next-door, each the perfect son, brother or boyfriend. But puppy love couldn't last, and after 1972-73 their millions of fans moved on to new idols.

THE STORY OF ROCK has been as much a tale of record companies in search of profits as one of musical integrity and virtuosity. From the Fifties, rock music has generated massive profits for record companies, publishing houses, booking agencies, managers, producers, session musicians and, finally, the recording artists themselves.

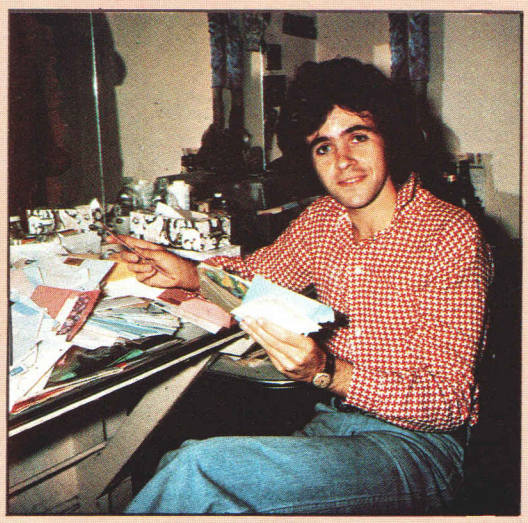
The creation and definition of pop stars has its antecedents in Hollywood. Movies provided (and still provide) stereotypes that could be easily recognised and understood by the public – the precocious kid, the boy-and-girl-next-door, the teenage rebel, the Latin heart-throb, the tough guy or the curvaceous sex symbol. All these have been adopted by the music business. As with the selling of movies, soapflakes or motor cars, sex has always been a main selling-point in the industry's marketing of its product.

The most direct and pernicious forms of market manipulation concern the bribing of disc jockeys to play certain records (payola) and the practice of 'hyping' records into the charts. Rather more legitimate attempts to manipulate the popular music market may be divided into two main phases: the years up until the mid-Sixties, when the major companies had little understanding of the market's workings, and were outpaced by the enterprise of those running independent record labels; and the years since then, when a generation brought up on rock, with an intuitive understanding of the basic precepts of rock'n'roll and its audience, achieved corporate influence.

Assembly-line stars

The packaging of rock singers or groups is a conservative reaction to the fluctuations of an uncertain market. The basic presupposition is that a potential market exists and that it can be reached merely through the presentation of the right set of ingredients. Groups produced in this way signal the industry's occasional bafflement with its audience and its hopeful attempts to prove that the music business abides by the same rules as any other: that logical reasons govern purchase, rather than merely emotional response.

Exposure is crucial to the creation of new stars. One way of achieving this is to have them appear regularly on television shows. In the late Fifties, the record companies around



Philadelphia were quick to adopt this policy, using Dick Clark's 'American Bandstand' as a means of exposing their acts to the television audience.

When manufactured artists are conceived and marketed correctly, large profits can result. During the mid Sixties, American media companies saw the commercial possibilities of fabricating a group and then showcasing it in a television series: the result was the Monkees, created by NBC-TV in 1966 to be America's instant answer to the Beatles.

The popularity of the Monkees led to further experimentation in this area with 'The Archies' and 'The Partridge Family' series, both aimed at the same teenybop audience so unerringly exploited by the Monkees. The Archies were simply a group of session singers backing cartoon characters, and the limitations of this idea resulted in only one hit, 'Sugar Sugar'. 'The Partridge Family' format, however, was much better realised. The shows were a nice blend of cosy family security and pop, featuring a trendy young mum (Shirley Jones) and her attractive singing family. Its success was instrumental in launching David Cassidy as an international heart-throb in the early Seventies.

'The Partridge Family' showed the way for other family acts like the Osmonds. The teenies were thus granted stars of their own tender years to worship, as first Donny (with 'Puppy Love') and then Little Jimmy Osmond (with 'Long Haired Lover From Liverpool') stormed the charts.

Sound and vision

The British music industry did not have such ready access to television as its American counterpart, lacking the latter's multi-media interests and involvements. While the BBC and ITV networks featured established acts on such shows as 'Thank Your Lucky Stars', 'Ready, Steady, Go!' and 'Top Of The Pops', the stations themselves initially lacked either the commercial initiative or the funds to originate their own series based around a 'manufactured' group. The chart popularity of theme tunes or songs from television programmes created no new stars, being performed by established artists. Apart from the launching of Sheena Easton via the BBC's 'The Big Time' series and the showing of the American series 'Fame' (which prompted a run of hit LPs, singles and live tours in Britain), for many years the utilisation of television by the British record industry was best exemplified by the groups representing the United Kingdom in the Eurovision Song Contest.

Bucks Fizz were just such a group. Brought together to perform 'Making Your Mind Up' for the 1981 contest, they went on to gain a rapid succession of chart hits. As much as any of the aforementioned American stars, Bucks Fizz sell a carefully constructed image – that of fun-loving (though also knowingly sexy) boys-and-girls-next-door.

From the Seventies onwards the use of video promotional films has revolutionised the marketing of an artist's product. No longer content with showing their acts simply miming on stage on television shows, record companies both in Britain and the US have invested huge sums to ensure their bands have maximum visual appeal, employing first-rate directors, such as Don Letts and Steve Barron.

The Svengalis of swing

With television initially playing only a minor role in the marketing of new acts, the British record industry preferred to pick up on reliable indicators of market potential, usually through the prior existence of an act having a strong local following. When musical trends moved too fast for the music companies to keep pace, market manipulation fell into the hands of entrepreneurs who located a market need, found a product to fill it and only then involved the record industry.

In the Fifties, the British music business had been thrown into disarray by the rock'n'roll boom. Hitherto attuned to crooners and dance bands, it attempted to meet the American invasion with homegrown acts, but had no idea where challengers could be found. Reliance was thus placed on businessmen such as Larry Parnes who claimed to understand the new style. Potential stars were discovered, given unlikely names like Marty Wilde and Billy Fury, and touted around the variety circuit (then the British record industry's equivalent to television). The story of Tommy Steele's success was a prime example of his commercial skill; Parnes plucked a semi-pro singer, Thomas Hicks, from obscurity and moulded him, somewhat spuriously, into the first

Above left: David Essex, a pop star who graduated from stage and screen, answers his fan mail. Perfecting a homely blend of cockney charm and unthreatening sex appeal, dishy David continued to make hearts flutter through the Seventies and Eighties. Above: 'Fame', an American TV series based on Alan Parker's 1980 film, promised showbiz success for aspiring young dancers – and captivated millions of youthful viewers, particularly in the UK. Spin-off records and tours made The Kids From Fame *industry an especially productive one.*

indigenous rock'n'roll star.

Parnes' achievements were mirrored in the Seventies and Eighties by Malcolm McLaren – both men constructed a myth that they alone understood the new music fashions. With the Sex Pistols and, later, Bow Wow Wow, McLaren (who in 1982 became a pop star himself with his single 'Buffalo Gals') crystallised images and musical styles intended deliberately to shock accepted standards and gain publicity for group and manager. His methods and his protégés' anarchic exploits – documented in the Sex Pistols' film *The Great Rock 'n'Roll Swindle* (1980) – temporarily rocked the major companies, who were suddenly made aware of how pitifully out of touch they were.

Managers or producers often effect dramatic changes in an act's image; these transformations are the stuff of rock mythology, seemingly magic tales of the changing of water into wine. The Beatles and the Rolling Stones, who first achieved fame under the guidance of astute managers, are often cited as examples of this 'mythical' process, although this view tends to demean the raw materials with which Brian Epstein and Andrew Loog Oldham respectively worked. Neither created the group, but both concentrated on refining its appearance and public image. The two men rechannelled pre-existing talent using their own business acumen and contacts. They gave the impression that the rock market worked logically after all.

In their assessment of how to get an act noticed, both followed in the footsteps of Alan Freed. Freed offered advice and help about the best way for early rock'n'roll singers to hit the big time, often for a percentage of the profits. He successfully contrived to present black music to a white audience; under these conditions, acts needed advice on what songs and what clothes were suitable for the new market.

A similar case was that of Elvis Presley and his manager Colonel Tom Parker. Parker himself always maintained that the music was Presley's business but that the packaging of it was his own. That marketing was concerned with the public face of the performer and the ways in which it could be used to generate the consumption of product. Elvis made the music, Parker made sure it sold.

Here come the mirror men

The most daring metamorphoses of all are often those brought about by the artists themselves. By changing his image, a singer automatically hopes to associate himself with another, potentially more fruitful market. Such changes sometimes go beyond the mere following of fashion: David Bowie's continual repackaging of himself, from Mod to the androgynous Ziggy Stardust, to the soul boy of 'Young Americans', to the mime of 'Ashes To Ashes', is the prime example of a recording artist continually redefining his audience. By repeatedly altering his persona, Bowie both anticipates and follows fashion, bringing the style of the avant-garde to the marketplace in a saleable form.

The radical changes undergone by Bowie have not been matched by any other performer, though the principle of searching for new and more attractive markets has long been an accepted one. Other image changes have involved moves towards a commercial market from the underground, as was the case with Marc Bolan, or have been the result of a chance hit, as was the case with Gary Glitter, where the surprise success was sustained by the star's flair for self-publicity.

It is a showbusiness truism that, once out of favour, it is hard to make a comeback. Year after year the public makes clear that it just isn't interested in repackaged versions of old favourites – witness the problems of David Cassidy in gaining acceptance as an artist after the waves of teen hysteria had abated. Novelty plays an important part in the selling process, as bands like the Goombay Dance Band, Tight Fit and the Wombles have shown, but in the long run an act must have more than just a cleverly constructed image to survive for long in the jungle of the music industry. PAUL FRYER

Below: Tight Fit – alias 'Tarzan' Steve Grant and his two 'Janes', brunette Denise Gyngell and blonde Julie Harris – was a group manufactured and marketed as three bodies beautiful and, with the help of a jokey studio-jungle video, their version of 'The Lion Sleeps Tonight' topped the UK charts in 1982. But later the girls were sacked, being replaced by two near-identical pop starlets.

Puppy Love

The wholesome appeal of the Osmond family

'IT WAS NOT UNTIL groups like the Osmond brothers appeared on the scene that the pop revolution really got underway,' wrote Richard Robinson in his 1972 book *The Osmond Brothers And The New Pop Scene*. 'Ignoring the psychedelic effects and spaced-out rock and roll that has been so popular during the past five years, the Osmonds started a whole new musical era with their refreshing, exciting sounds.' This, of course, was patent nonsense: rather than offering anything new, the Osmonds represented a return to the pre-Beatles teen-idol traditions of Philadelphia.

Of all the teen-pop stars to emerge in the early Seventies, the Osmonds were the cleanest, the most wholesome and respectable. Unlike Marc Bolan, they didn't pout sexily; unlike Sweet, they didn't don effeminate make-up; unlike David Cassidy, they didn't wiggle bottoms suggestively; unlike the Jackson Five, they weren't black. Like the Avalons, Rydells and Fabians of the previous decade, the Osmond brothers were tame, safe and conservative; and, with few to rival their smiling, unthreatening approach, their brief but enormous commercial success far outstripped that of the Sixties Philly teen idols from whom they borrowed so much.

With seven singing siblings, the Osmond family were able to penetrate more than just one corner of the market. For the teens, there was a five-piece group who provided uptempo pop; for the pre-pubescents, there was the group's principal star Donny with his solo ballads of forbidden teenage romance (all, incidentally, revivals of hits by such boys-next-door of yesteryear as Paul Anka, Frankie Avalon and Tab Hunter); for tots and their grandparents there were the bouncy, chirruping novelties of the podgy, pre-teen Little Jimmy; and for middle-aged lovers of middle-of-the-road country fare, there was sister Marie, alone or duetting with Donny. The Osmond family had it made.

Family favourites

Olive and George Osmond were a strict Mormon couple from Salt Lake City, Utah, who had eight sons and a daughter. The two eldest, Virl and Tom, were born partially deaf, but the next four arrivals, Alan (born 22 June 1949), Wayne (28 August 1951), Merrill (30 April 1953) and Jay (2 March 1955), were perfect specimens who quickly learned the art of close harmony singing from their father and saxophone-playing mother. At family gatherings, the four brothers developed a barbershop act and were soon performing songs like 'The Old Oaken Bucket' at Mormon church functions.

On holiday in California in 1961, the boys visited Disneyland, were invited on stage to sing and, as a result, were offered a residency at the amusement centre. Here, they were spotted one night by the father of Andy Williams, who recommended the youthful quartet to his singing-star son. The Osmond brothers were booked to appear on 'The Andy Williams Show' and were subsequently given a regular spot on the programme. Further television work followed: the boys acted in 'The Travels Of Jamie McPheeters', a Western adventure series starring Charles Bronson and a young Kurt Russell; they sang on 'The Jerry Lewis Show' and guested in a TV special, 'The Seven Little Foys', which marked the arrival of five-year-old kid brother Donny (born 9 December 1957).

Below: George and Olive Osmond pose proudly among their singing brood.

The Osmonds continued to perform variety acts on stage and TV throughout the Sixties, singing old-time melodies and tap-dancing. Then, in 1970, the Jackson Five hit the US singles charts with 'ABC'. The sudden popularity of five brothers – the youngest of whom, Michael, was the same age as Donny – did not escape the attention of George and Olive Osmond. Their offspring were offered to MGM Records as a white alternative to the Jacksons – MGM recognised the possibilities and dispatched the boys to Muscle Shoals studios to record a single. Written by George Jackson, 'One Bad Apple' was a virtual copy of the Jackson Five's sound – Donny's exuberant falsetto emulating that of Michael Jackson – and in February 1971, the record reached the top of the American charts.

Further success followed with 'Double Lovin'' and Joe South's 'Yo-Yo', and by the beginning of 1972, the Osmonds had taken over from the Jacksons and David Cassidy as the most adored pin-ups of teen-magazine subscribers. As if to underline the fact, ABC-TV had replaced their cartoon series 'The Jackson Five' with one called 'The Osmonds', consisting of scrappily-animated stories in which the boys were 'appointed goodwill ambassadors by the United States Music Commitee' and got into all sorts of scrapes.

It was apparent from the start that the appeal of the Osmonds was based largely on Donny's boyish innocence. He was hardly stunningly good-looking – like his brothers, he had a pudgy face, a snub-nose and over-large teeth – but little girls doted on him nonetheless and, while the Osmonds continued producing hits as a group, Donny pursued a parallel solo career as a juvenile, teen-throb balladeer.

In June 1972, his third solo single 'Puppy Love' (which had reached Number 3 in the US earlier in the year) made the top of the British charts.

In October, the Osmonds arrived at London's Heathrow Airport to find 8000 young girls waiting and screaming. The group's visit had been preceded by a massive media build-up, and British TV, press and radio seemed anxious to get as much mileage out of the family as possible. In the following weeks, the airwaves and papers were dominated by the sight and sound of the toothy teen idols. The brothers' public

Right: A bemused pair of policemen protect teen-throb balladeer Donny Osmond from over-excited fans.
Above: The Osmond brothers execute a slick stage routine.

persona was inoffensive and predictable to the point of nausea. Interviews with Donny were always the same – he loved girls but was too young to date – while his older brothers were forever uttering platitudes like: 'If we can make people happy with our music, that's great.'

Whatever they recorded, British teenagers bought, and for the next two years the family members, in their various permutations, churned out hits. On 9 December 1972, the group reached Number 2 with their lightweight rocker 'Crazy Horses' (a protest against automobile pollution written by Alan and Merrill) while two weeks later the overweight and precocious nine-year-old Little Jimmy Osmond (born 16 April 1963) made the top with the music-hall chirpiness of 'Long Haired Lover From Liverpool'. In 1973, Donny hit the top twice with 'The Twelfth Of Never' and 'Young Love', while sister Marie (born 13 October 1959) made Number 2 with Anita Bryant's 1960 C&W hit 'Paper Roses'. The following year, Donny and Marie teamed up for Top Ten versions of Dale and Grace's 'I'm Leaving It Up To You' and Tommy Edwards' 'Morning Side Of The Mountain', while the Osmonds as a whole achieved their first UK Number 1 with the smooth 'Love Me For A Reason'.

By the end of 1974, however, the Osmonds' popularity was declining rapidly. Donny was growing up and so were his fans, while the group's image of untarnished, grinning wholesomeness had become irritating. Their attempt at rock credibility with *The Plan* (1973), an album entirely written, played and produced by the group, had failed miserably – the musical performance was competent enough but the material itself was mediocre, while the record's religious 'concept' was hardly likely to seduce a rock audience.

In 1975, while the even less gifted and charismatic Bay City Rollers took charge of the British teen-pop market, the Osmonds were virtually forgotten. The family now returned to the type of audience that had sustained them throughout the Sixties: while children turned their fantasy-attentions to other singing stars, middle-aged Americans tuned in to Donny and Marie's TV series, applauded the singing, dancing Osmonds in Atlantic City casinos, followed Marie's on-off marriage saga in *People* magazine and were sold exotic fruit juice by brother and sister trilling jingles on tropical beaches during commercial breaks.

Sibilant siblings Marie and Donny Osmond notched four UK Top Thirty hits as a duo.

Although the Osmond family no longer sold records, mother Olive had invested her children's earnings wisely, building up a multi-million dollar record and publishing business and marketing cassette tapes of *The Story Of Joseph Smith* (the founder of Mormonism). The clan that *Life* magazine had once described as 'a plague of wholesomeness' would never starve.

TOM HIBBERT

The Osmonds
Recommended Listening

Live (MGM Super 2315 117) (Includes: Down By The Lazy River, Yo-Yo, One Bad Apple, Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child, Your Song, Hey Girl, Free).

ROCK ON

David Essex: acting the teen idol

IF YOU HAD GONE to a David Essex concert in the mid Seventies, you would have found yourself surrounded by screaming prepubescent girls. Not only did their repeated cries of 'David' make it extremely difficult to hear any of his songs, but the danger of a stampede for the stage posed a very real threat not only to the fans themselves but also to the object of their reverence. David Essex, though, had his own way to deal with this. Whereas other teenybopper stars like T.Rex, Mud, David Cassidy, Gary Glitter, the Sweet and Alvin Stardust had their shows disturbed in this way, Essex announced that if there were any storming of the stage, the music would stop. Although his early success rested on his boyish good looks and teen appeal, he was firmly committed to his music and its theatrical content. This, more than anything, has been the reason for his continued success.

From Hell's Kitchen to Godspell

Although it might have seemed to an outsider that David Essex had burst onto the scene overnight as Jesus in *Godspell* in 1971, this was far from the case. Born David Albert Cook in Plaistow, East London on 23 July 1947, he grew up in the Hell's Kitchen area of London's docklands, a tough area at the best of times. He quickly learned that, to survive, he had to join one of the local gangs. But he also realized he had to make it on his own: 'I began to think like a lot of kids around the area – that you've got to grab it, because no-one's going to give it to you.'

Above: The tousled, boy-next-door looks of David Essex – was this the face that launched a thousand fainting fits?

By the age of 13, he was playing truant from school to work in the local street market; within a year or so, he brushed with the law for riding a borrowed motorcycle under age. His obsession with bikes –

echoed in 1980 in his film *Silver Dream Racer* – had started, and his obsession with music was shortly to follow.

After his first taste of R&B at the Flamingo Club in Wardour Street, he persuaded his father to lay out 37s 6d for a second-hand drum kit. He joined his first group – the Everons, a semi-pro blues band – in 1963 and, with stardom in mind, gave up his apprenticeship as an engineer. Life as a musician was not to be easy, however, and over the next seven years his 10 singles all flopped. Manager Derek Bowman, who had seen him in those very early days and believed in his boy, did not give up. He moved his charge sideways into repertory theatre, with a lead part in a musical called *The Fantasticks*. In this and other productions up and down the country, David Essex gained invaluable acting experience. He even had bit parts in two films – *Assault* (1970) and *All Coppers Are* (1971) – but his break was to come at the end of 1971 when he was cast, out of 6000 applicants, to play Jesus in *Godspell*. The musical opened at the Roundhouse but quickly transferred to Wyndham's in the West End, where he played the part for two years.

Taking time out from *Godspell*, he co-starred with Ringo Starr in the film *That'll Be The Day* (1973), an evocative look at late Fifties youth culture and clumsy adolescent sexuality. David played Jim Maclaine, a working-class kid trying to be a star, a part that could have been written for Essex. The film ends with hints of hopes to come; but David was soon to surpass his fictional *alter ego*, achieving the stardom that Jim Maclaine sought.

Stardust

'Rock On', written by David Essex for the film, became his first hit, entering the UK charts in September 1973 where it remained for eight weeks, selling 3 million copies and peaking at Number 3. 'Lamplight' followed two months later, reaching Number 7, followed by 'America', all tracks from his first LP *Rock On*. His second LP, simply entitled *David Essex* (1974), yielded the hit single 'Gonna Make You A Star', which stayed in the charts for 12 weeks, reaching Number 1 in the UK and Number 3 in the States. This album also spawned his next hit – 'Stardust' – which hit the charts in December 1974 and reached Number 7; it was also the title of his next film, released in the same year.

Made as a sequel to *That'll Be The Day*, *Stardust* co-starred Adam Faith and Larry Hagman. It depicted Jim Maclaine's reactions to stardom; in the course of the film, he loses touch with his group, his audience and eventually with reality, overdosing on drugs. Unlike the character

Right: Essex on stage in the early Eighties, when his shows comprised a mix of his own hits and rock'n'roll standards. Far right: With Paul Nicholas in Stardust. *Essex gave a commanding performance as an idealistic, egotistical rock star.*

he portrayed, however, David Essex didn't succumb to the pressures of the music industry, but managed to keep his feet on the ground and remain in control of his own career. While glitter and glam-rock were in fashion, he would sport ordinary and even 'jumble sale' clothes, as he was depicted in 1975 on the cover of his third album, *All The Fun Of The Fair*.

His first six albums showed a lively song-writing talent. They include over 50 songs of his own composition. Of these 'Rolling Stone', 'If I Could', 'City Lights' and 'Coming Home' were all smash hits, and 'Hold Me Close' repeated the chart success of 'Gonna Make You A Star'. He drew extensively on his own experiences in his songs – 'If I Could', for example, was about the East End – and he could write a hard-rocking beat number just as effectively as a sentimental ballad.

Following *Godspell* and the two hit films, he began the rounds of numerous TV shows, undertook sell-out tours of Australia and the US and recorded the albums *Out On The Street* (1976) and *Gold And Ivory* (1977), both of which he produced himself. His love of the stage, however, was never far away and in 1978 he returned to the West End to portray Che Guevara in the Tim Rice/Andrew Lloyd-Webber musical *Evita*. With this went a change of record label, from CBS to Phonogram and another hit single 'Oh, What A Circus', a song taken from the show.

Evita was followed by another tour, the albums *Imperial Wizard* (1979) and *Hot Love* (1980), and another film, *Silver Dream Racer*, for which he wrote the score; the title song was a Number 3 hit single. His 1981 LP *Be-Bop The Future* was produced by Al Kooper and featured such prestigious musicians as Steely Dan's Jeff Baxter, Herbie Flowers, John 'Rabbit' Bundrick and Kooper himself. That year David Essex again returned to the West End theatre, this time for a straight role as Lord Byron in Romulus Winney's 'Childe Byron' at the Young Vic.

An embarrassing TV appearance as a singing MC on 'The David Essex Showcase' series was redeemed in 1982 by two huge hits – 'Me And My Girl (Nightclubbing)' and 'A Winter's Tale'. The latter was a throwback to *Godspell* and *Evita* in that the lyrics were penned by Tim Rice; music for the easy-paced number was written by Mike Batt. 1983 found him doing yet another tour, working on a musical of 'Mutiny On The Bounty' and looking ahead to recreating his stage success in the film version of *Evita*. A workaholic, David Essex has not been prepared to sit back and trade on past successes; his tireless activity must be a major reason for his continuing success.

JOHN STRETTON

David Essex
Recommended Listening

The David Essex Album (CBS 1101) (Includes: Gonna Make You A Star, Lamplight, Hold Me Close, Rock On, Stardust, America).

ROLLERMANIA!

DURING 1974 and 1975, the Bay City Rollers were the teen sensation of Britain. At the peak of their popularity, their fan club claimed to be receiving 11,000 letters a *day*, and they were selling millions of records around the world. They scored ten Top Ten hits in Britain and reached Number 1 in America. They also split the pop world in two. Their hysterical adolescent fans treated them as gods, but to nearly everyone else they were simply five rather dim Scots boys in half-mast trousers and tartan scarfs.

The Bay City Rollers started life as the Saxons, an Edinburgh band formed by the school-age Longmuir brothers Alan (born 20 June 1953) and Derek (born 19 March 1952). Their first break came early in 1969 when Alan eventually persuaded local dance band leader Tam Paton to come and listen to them. Tired of having his coffee breaks at the Palais de Danse interrupted by this strangely persistent 15-year-old, Paton finally went along just to get the boy off his back. The group's music wasn't up to much – the usual schoolboy versions of Beatles songs played in the back bedroom of an Edinburgh council flat – but their enthusiasm convinced Paton that he should take them on. At this stage they had played only a few local gigs, first as the Saxons and then the Bay City Rollers, but Paton, who had no previous managerial experience, managed to get them a residency at the local Top Storey club and dressed them in pink suits and black bow ties.

From Scotland came the tartan tearaways . . .

Edinburgh rock

He also gave up his own musical career and worked instead as a lorry driver with his father's wholesale business so he could devote more time to the group. The Rollers spent the next two years playing around Scotland, gathering a large following but making little money. Then in 1971 Dick Leahy, head of Bell Records in the UK,

found himself with a few hours to kill in Edinburgh after missing a plane home and was persuaded to see the group. The frenzied teenage reaction to the Rollers' bouncy pop tunes so amazed Leahy that he decided to sign them up.

The group now consisted of Derek (drums), Alan (bass), Nobby Clark (vocals), Dave Paton (guitar) and Billy Lyall (keyboards). Despite Bell's offer, however, Paton and Lyall now left the group (later re-surfacing as members of Pilot) and guitarist Neil Henderson and keyboard player Archie Marr were brought in. Subsequently a second guitar player, Eric Faulkner (born 21 October 1954) was added to the line-up and Marr was dropped.

In June 1971, the Rollers' first single was released. Entitled 'Keep On Dancing', it had been a US hit in 1965 for the Gentrys. Produced by Jonathan King, the record made no impression initially, but radio finally picked up on it, and extensive airplay helped it reach Number 9. During the next 18 months, three follow-up singles – 'We Can Make Music', 'Manana' and 'Saturday Night' – flopped, and the group were soon all back doing odd jobs in Edinburgh to make ends meet. Changing their producer to Ken Howard and Alan Blakley for 'Manana' and then Bill Martin and Phil Coulter for 'Saturday Night' had seemingly little effect on sales, although the fact that 'Saturday Night' became a Number 1 in the US in 1975 and 'Manana' sold well in Europe after winning Luxembourg's International Song Competition suggests that Bell's British promotion machine was not up to scratch.

Milk and alcohol

In February 1974, however, the group's final chance with Bell, another Martin/Coulter production entitled 'Remember (Sha-La-La)', reached Number 6. Almost in desperation, Paton had publicised the record by sending 10,000 photos of the group to addresses lifted from the personal columns of pop magazines. And the week 'Remember (Sha-La-La)' was bubbling under, 'Top Of The Pops' viewers saw the famous Rollers outfits for the first time after Eric Faulkner suggested they exaggerate the fashion for rather short trousers that seemed so popular with kids in Scotland.

After four years on the road, however, the Bay City Rollers were on the verge of splitting up – some members were barely on speaking terms – and only success held the nucleus together. Even a chart record couldn't persuade new guitarist John Devine or Nobby Clark to stay; they quit, grumbling about the tyrannical way Paton prowled around hotel corridors in an attempt to keep the group away from girls. Consequently by the time the next single, 'Shang-A-Lang', spread the first ripples of Rollermania by zipping up the charts to Number 2, the famous line-up of the Longmuir brothers, Eric Faulkner, rhythm guitarist Stuart 'Woody' Wood (born 25 February 1957) and singer Les McKeown (born 12 November 1955), was complete.

Opposite: Woody braces himself for success. Behind him, from left: Les, Derek, Alan and Eric. Above: Fans clamoured to reach their idols whenever the tartan tearaways performed their hits.

At last, the Rollers took off. 'Summerlove Sensation' reached Number 3 in August and 'All Of Me Loves All Of You' made Number 4 two months later, while their first album, *Rollin'*, climbed to the top of the LP charts. Early in 1975, their first session with Phil Wainman, who was to become their regular producer, resulted in their first Number 1 single, 'Bye Bye Baby', and this was followed to the top in July by 'Give A Little Love'. Meanwhile, the ratings of TV pop shows had rocketed with frequent appearances from the Bay City Rollers. They were virtually the resident group on Mike Mansfield's 'Supersonic' and they were even given their own show, entitled 'Shang-A-Lang'. And no live performance was complete without a stage surrounded by steel barriers and a row of security men, absolutely bewildered by the scenes of adolescent frenzy.

Live from Scotland: The Bay City Rollers hosted their own TV show, 'Shang-A-Lang' (above left and right). Below: The boys toast their manager Tam Paton and his bride-to-be Marcella Knaislova on the occasion of their engagement.

The group's publicity machine unceasingly pushed out an image of the Rollers as non-drinking, non-smoking, hard-working teenagers with no time for girlfriends. 'We never go to parties. If you're at parties all night, it affects your work in the end,' said Paton. And: 'When we travel, we stop and have a milk or something but never ever go into pubs.' But behind the virginal facade, a riot was going on: threesomes in hotel bedrooms with teenage fans, tripping out on acid, drunken orgies.

Two of the Rollers, Eric Faulkner and Alan Longmuir, attempted suicide, while

Les McKeown killed an ageing pedestrian in a road accident and was accused of firing an air gun at young fans camped outside his house. Founder member Alan Longmuir eventually left in April 1976, unable to take the pressure any longer (though he rejoined two years later). He was replaced by 17-year-old Ian Mitchell, who was himself replaced after 6 months by Pat McGlynn. It didn't seem to matter who was in the Rollers – it was the collective image that counted.

Image is all

Responsibility for this image – and the group's success and subsequent collapse – can be laid at Tam Paton's door. In the mid Sixties, he had been given a tip by Brian Epstein which, in a fairly unsubtle way, he used to guide the Rollers' entire career. Paton was playing piano in a group called the Crusaders, which broke up after coming tenth in a London talent competition judged by the Beatles' manager. When he approached Epstein afterwards, Paton was told that his group had scored so badly because they lacked a clearly drawn image.

Consequently, when he took on the Rollers, Paton worked through countless ways of presenting his boys – see-through trousers, for instance – before coming up with the one that worked. But he overdid it. So many publicity stories went out about the group not having girlfriends – in order that young record-buyers everywhere could enjoy untrammelled dreams of being the one girl in the world who could make her favourite Roller's life complete – that the press simply assumed the boys were gay. And even though Paton's style may have given the group a brief, frenzied fling at the top, it restricted the wider appeal and musical development they eventually came to want.

In addition, there was nothing of substance *behind* the image. An attempt to give the group complementary personalities like the Beatles – Derek was the quiet one, Woody the prankster – failed because the Rollers were neither bright nor witty enough to stand individual scrutiny. When, for instance, Les was asked why he was in the music business, all he could muster was the stock showbiz reply: 'I guess I get a buzz from making people happy.'

Where previous teenybop idols like the Monkees or Marc Bolan had provoked mild contempt or amusement, the Bay City Rollers inspired an enmity rarely seen in pop music. The *New Musical Express* labelled them 'assembly line androids in clowns' outfits' and even Tam Paton was moved to remark how boring they were: 'We've really got nothing in common. How can you talk to them about politics? I don't think any of them even know who the Prime Minister is.'

But their ignorance and vacuity did not prevent an American breakthrough, and in October 1975 they set off on their first US trip. Their nationality was used to package them in much the same way as British groups of the early Sixties. On the Howard Cossell TV show, for instance, Scottish bagpipes set the scene as a huge tartan box, labelled 'Live From Scotland', collapsed to reveal the Rollers playing 'Saturday Night'. The song went on to become a US Number 1 and the group enjoyed America enough to return often.

Back in Britain, however, they managed only two Top Ten hits in 1976 – 'Love Me Like I Love You' and 'I Only Wanna Be With You' – despite a sellout concert tour. When they quit their homeland for tax purposes and embarked on lucrative tours of Japan and the States in the following year, their popularity waned dramatically. British fans were tiring of their bouncy but by now monotonous sound and felt deserted, too.

Back to zero

As their success began to wane, the group members started to quarrel and in August 1978 they sacked Les McKeown (though he said he resigned), claiming that the singer had 'gone all Hollywood' on them, chasing Britt Ekland around Los Angeles when he should have been rehearsing their next album. The egocentric McKeown, incidentally, was so generally unpopular by this stage that when the group were filming a 13-part series for the NBC US TV network, a cameraman thrust a custard pie in his face on behalf of the entire production crew, which was fed up with his tantrums.

McKeown was replaced by South African Duncan Faure, but the group, by now, was finished. It was over a year since they had had a UK hit single and finally, in August 1979, Tam Paton received a phonecall dismissing him as manager. 'I took those boys to the top,' he said at the time. 'When they stopped taking my advice, they went on the slide.' He was probably right – even if the image he had given them did contain the seeds of its own destruction.

Two years later, while McKeown was appearing second on the bill to the Nolans in Japan, the Rollers attempted a comeback with the album *Ricochet* on the Epic label. Despite some polite press coverage, no-one was really very interested.

In retrospect, the Bay City Rollers are little more than a name in rock history. They probably retain a place in the affections of the teenyboppers they whipped to such adolescent hysteria. But their contribution to music was absolutely zero.

COLIN SHEARMAN

Bay City Rollers
Recommended Listening

Rollin' (Bell 8005) (Includes: Saturday Night, Remember (Sha-La-La), Shang-A-Lang, Summerlove Sensation, Angel Angel).

Right: La vie en rose – Les McKeown accepts the gift of a flower from an ecstatic young fan.

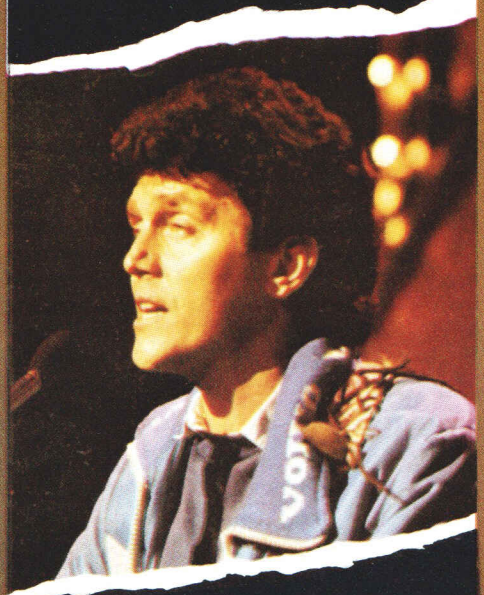
STARDUST MEMORIES

Success struck three times for Shane Fenton

Alvin Stardust
Recommended Listening

Greatest Hits (Magnet MAG 4002) (Includes: My Coo-Ca-Choo, Jealous Mind, Red Dress).

Sixties pop star Shane Fenton (above) dons leather to become Alvin Stardust (opposite) Below: Rockabilly Alvin in the Eighties.



THE CAREER OF Alvin Stardust began in the pre-British beat days of the early Sixties. Back then he was known as Shane Fenton and, with backing group the Fentones, enjoyed mild success before the arrival of the Beatles abruptly curtailed their run of chart appearances. But while many of his contemporaries floundered and sank in the post-Beatles boom, never to be heard of again, Fenton was able to engineer a startling comeback a decade later. Following hot on the heels of teen-pop successes T.Rex, Sweet and Gary Glitter, Shane Fenton became Alvin Stardust, a slinky figure in tight black leather and – although rapidly approaching 30 – a teen idol once more.

Cool and moody

Stardust was born Bernard Jewry in the North London suburb of Muswell Hill in September 1944. His family moved to Mansfield, Nottinghamshire, when Bernard was two. Bitten by the rock'n'roll bug in the mid Fifties, Jewry formed a friendship with a local group, Johnny Theakston and the Tremeloes. The group subsequently changed their name to the Fentones and landed a spot on BBC radio's prestigious 'Saturday Club' pop show. Only a few days before their appearance, however, the Fentones singer collapsed and died within 48 hours. Bernard Jewry had occasionally sung with the group at their Palais appearances and was asked to stand in as their vocalist. So Bernard Jewry changed his name to Shane Fenton and fronted the group for the show.

A recording contract eventually followed, and Shane Fenton and the Fentones entered the charts in October 1961 with 'I'm A Moody Guy', which peaked at Number 22. 1962 brought three further Top Forty hits for the group, 'Walk Away', 'It's All Over Now' and 'Cindy's Birthday', the last of which reached Number 19 in August and was the Fentones' biggest hit.

With the Beatles offering something immediately fresh and exciting to British pop, the Fentones' sound became dated virtually overnight. While the Fentones themselves scored a couple of minor instrumental hits – with 'The Mexican' and 'The Breeze And I' in 1962 – Shane Fenton and his group looked set for the obscurity which beckoned so many British rock-'n'rollers following the Liverpool boom.

True to form, Fenton and the Fentones made a desultory stab at films, appearing with Billy Fury, Bobby Vee and Helen Shapiro in Michael Winner's 1962 film *Play It Cool*, in which they performed one number, 'It's Gonna Take Magic'. But by 1963 the Beatles and their beat contemporaries had taken control of the charts. Tired of the constant package tours and their lack of success, the group called it a day, and soon after their dissolution Fenton moved into management; his charges included Lulu and the Hollies, which reunited him with former Fentones' drummer Bobby Elliott. It was to be a long sabbatical from the charts for Fenton, however – and, apart from 'Moody Guy' being revived on the radio, he was all but forgotten.

Following a chance meeting with Michael Levy in the early Seventies, he signed to Levy's recently-founded independent label, Magnet. But it took an astute young writer/producer called Peter Shelley to bring Shane Fenton back from the grave. Shelley was looking for a way to capitalise on the British glam pop boom: if Mike Leander could play Doctor Frankenstein and create a success like Gary Glitter, reasoned Shelley, why couldn't he?

Shelley was an able composer of lightweight pop material – he was to register hits under his own name with 'Gee Baby' in 1974, and the canine nausea of 'Love Me, Love My Dog' in 1975. What Shelley wanted in 1973, though, was someone who could project the image to match a name he had already created – Alvin Stardust.

The leather boy

Bernard Jewry/Shane Fenton was delighted at the opportunity to have another crack at the charts, and recognised the commercial possibilities of Shelley's song, 'My Coo-Ca-Choo'. Within weeks of its release in the autumn of 1973, it had reached Number 2 in the British charts, being kept from the top slot only by teenypop idol David Cassidy's mawkish 'Darlin''/'The Puppy Song', and the single was a Top Ten hit all across Europe and the Far East that same year. 'My Coo-Ca-Choo' was a hypnotically catchy debut for Alvin Stardust and its resonant bass sound and slightly suggestive lyrics were matched by Stardust's glistening stage persona. Clad from neck to toe in black leather, enormous rings glittering on his gloves, coiling the microphone in a manner not seen since Dave Berry's heyday, Alvin Stardust was able to project a kind of virile sensuality which appealed to a pop world up to its eyes in mascara.

In February 1974, the follow-up single, 'Jealous Mind', went one better and made the top of the UK charts. Alvin hit the Top Twenty three more times that year, with 'Red Dress', 'You You You' and 'Tell Me Why'. Shelley's songs were simple pop fare and scarcely original, yet they were enhanced by Stardust's resonant vocals and his love of classic rock'n'roll. Together, Stardust and Shelley filched the best

elements of Johnny Kidd and the Pirates and the stage image of Gene Vincent, while hints of Elvis Presley's vocal phrasing could be detected in Stardust's singing.

Then, as quickly as they had arrived, the hits dried up. 'Good Love Can Never Die' reached Number 11 in February 1975, but 'Sweet Cheatin' Rita' could only make it to Number 37. And after that – nothing. Alvin Stardust looked as though he was set to become as much of an anachronism in the Seventies as Shane Fenton had been in the Sixties. Stardust kept plugging away, though, with singles that included a credible and appealing Jonathan King production of Bruce Springsteen's 'Growin' Up'. But this was 1977 and a new age of leather had arrived – the contemporary appeal of punk meant that Alvin Stardust was almost a forgotten man once again.

A Stiff no more

While a new generation charged at the charts, however, there was a renewed fascination in original rock 'n'roll and British pop TV Svengali Jack Good endeavoured to cater for this interest by recreating the fervour of his TV shows of the Fifties. Thus, in the late Seventies, the revived 'Oh Boy' and 'Let It Rock' saw Alvin Stardust sharing the bill with a young singer who was destined to become a star of the Eighties – Shakin' Stevens.

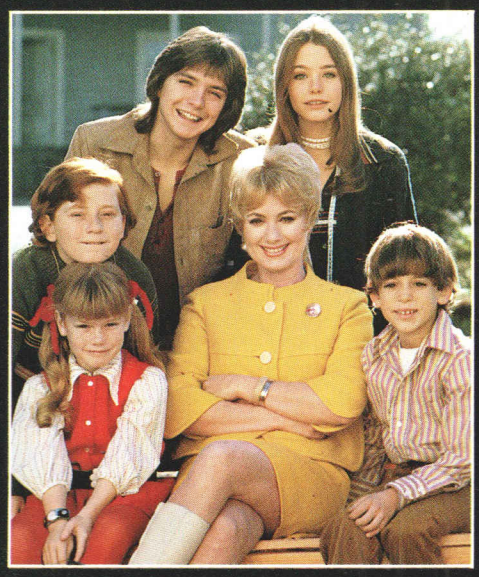
These TV appearances did little to revive Stardust's flagging career – but, just when it seemed as though he would never again grace 'Top Of The Pops', the record company mavericks of Stiff Records stepped in. During their heyday, Stiff (one of whose more memorable mottoes was 'If they're dead – we'll sign 'em!') boasted an awesome new-wave roster, with the Damned, Ian Dury, Elvis Costello, Nick Lowe and Wreckless Eric. But by the early Eighties, apart from Madness, their chart fortunes relied mainly on one-off deals.

Alvin Stardust signed to Stiff in August 1981, and within two months found himself at Number 4 with 'Pretend', a joyous slice of rockabilly performed Eighties-style. It was sufficient to ensure him a slot on that year's Royal Command Performance, where he appeared in a celebration of '25 Years Of British Rock'n'Roll', along with ageing rockers Marty Wilde and Lonnie Donegan – neither of whom had had a sniff of chart success for 20 years.

Stardust's follow-up, 'A Wonderful Time Up There', was a thunderous slab of gospel pop; it failed to reach the heights of 'Pretend', but kept his name in the public eye. Then in 1982 Stardust was back in the charts once more with a catchy cover of Joe Brown's 'Picture Of You', sung with all the enthusiasm he had mustered as Shane Fenton two decades before. Now happily married to actress Liza Goddard, Stardust no longer presented an image of leather-clad menace, but the fact that he seemed able to bounce back decade after decade was a tribute to his durability and innate pop style.

PATRICK HUMPHRIES

Darling David



Above: America's top rock group? The Partridge Family pose on the lawn. Below: David Cassidy shimmers in the spotlight. Opposite: Strumming away at the heartstrings of his youthful following.

David Cassidy
Recommended Listening

Cassidy Live (Bell 243 2308) (Includes: Breaking Up Is Hard To Do, I Am A Clown, How Can I Be Sure, It's Praying On My Mind, Daydreamer, Some Kind Of Summer, Please Please Me).

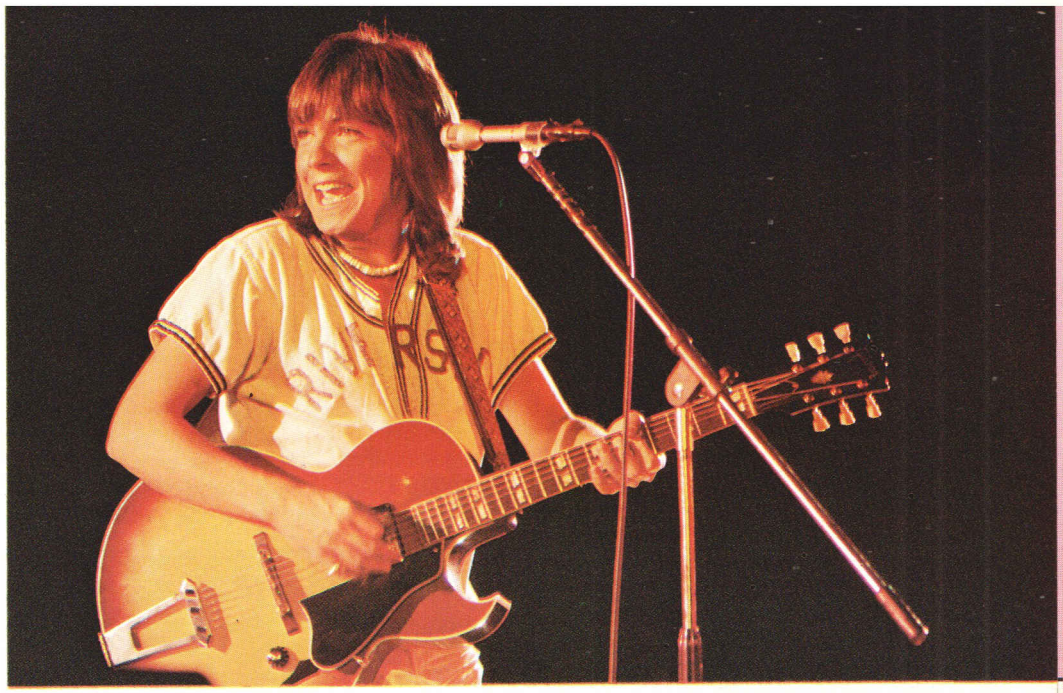
dream from the TV screen

'CAN AMERICA'S TOP rock group prevail against the evil machinations of a fat but deadly enemy agent – without blowing their cool?' ran the blurb on the back cover of a 1970 US novelette. The writer went on to describe 'America's top rock group' thus: 'They're a high-voltage six-pack of talent and energy – five groovy kids plus one beautiful, mini-skirted Mom – an all-American super-singing weapon.' And just who *were* 'America's top rock group'? The book's title provided the answer: *The Partridge Family*.

In November 1970, the Partridge Family's 'I Think I Love You' reached the top of the US charts while 'I'll Meet You Halfway' and 'Doesn't Somebody Want To Be Wanted' both made the Top Ten the following year. But it was not through recording rock songs in the family garage that the Partridge Family had made it to the top; it was through being six TV actors contracted to a series about a clean young American family whose hobby was making music together. The kids had the usual problems – what to wear to high-school dances, unsightly braces on their teeth, disastrous blind dates and unrequited crushes. The fact that they had to go out on the road and play in the family pop group was almost incidental to the show's plots or the programme's appeal. 'The Partridge Family' had more in common with 'The Brady Bunch' or 'My Three Sons' than it did with 'The Monkees' (where music *had* played an essential part in proceedings); nevertheless, spin-off records credited to the Partridge Family (and played by Hollywood session musicians) made the charts. And they made a pop star out of David Cassidy, the actor who portrayed Keith and, apart from the occasional contribution by Shirley Jones, was the only cast member who actually sang on any of the recordings.

Shirley's boy

David Cassidy was born in New York on 12 April 1950, the son of actor Jack Cassidy. After leaving college, David took up acting himself, working for the Los Angeles Theatre Group. By 1968, he was landing regular TV work in such series as 'Ironside', 'The Survivors', 'Marcus Welby MD', 'Bonanza' and 'The Mod Squad'. Then in early 1970, his stepmother Shirley Jones was contracted by Screen Gems-Columbia (who had been behind the Monkees show) to star in a new pop-oriented soap opera entitled 'The Partridge Family'. Jones – a screen actress/singer of some repute who had starred in *Oklahoma!* (1955), *Carousel* (1956) and *The Music Man* (1962) and won an Oscar for her performance in *Elmer Gantry* (1960) – suggested that her stepson play her son Keith in the TV show. Cassidy's pretty, fresh-faced looks were in keeping with the traditional US teen idol image; also, he was a competent singer.



'The Partridge Family' was an immediate hit, although the music that accompanied it was dull and staid even by teenybop standards. Producer Wes Farrell wrote or co-wrote many of the songs himself, making up the numbers by dredging up old hits like Neil Sedaka's 'Breaking Up Is Hard To Do' and Gene Pitney's 'Looking Through The Eyes Of Love' and re-arranging them with more than a degree of mediocrity. But Cassidy's baby face and breathy vocals sold the product, and it was inevitable that he would soon be recording in his own right.

Confessions of a pop idol

In 1971, 'Cherish', a solo reworking of the Association's 1966 hit, reached Number 9 in the US charts, while the first album released under his name, also called *Cherish*, sold a million. The LP's music was bland, sanitised, middle-of-the-road pop – but with the force of TV and teen magazines behind him, Cassidy's success seemed unstoppable. But then, in March 1972, the actor/singer was guilty of a disastrous error when, in a *Rolling Stone* interview, he made some 'startling' confessions. He loathed his role in 'The Partridge Family', he said. He had dabbled with drugs and he quite liked sex! The Keith Partridge boy-next-door myth was exploded and his popularity in the States began to dwindle.

Cassidy's three 1972 singles, 'Could It Be Forever', 'How Can I Be Sure' and 'Rock Me Baby' all failed to reach the Top Twenty so, in mid 1973, Cassidy and management turned their attentions to Britain, where a teen-pop revival was in full swing. Furthermore, 'The Partridge Family' was being networked on English television – a fact that had helped 'I Think I Love You' and 'It's One Of Those Nights (Yes Love)' into the UK Top Twenty and 'Breaking Up Is Hard To Do' and 'Looking Through The Eyes Of Love' into the Top Ten. In April 1972, Cassidy's solo 'Could It Be Forever' had reached Number 2, while 'How Can I Be Sure' had given him a chart-topper six months later.

Leaving home

In October 1973, Cassidy arrived in London to try to capitalise on his fame. A couple of interviews and a mime to his new record 'Daydreamer' on 'Top Of The Pops' was enough to send the single to the top. Yet, although this seemed to augur well for the future, Cassidy was by now tiring of his teen-idol role. At the end of 1973, he left 'The Partridge Family' – the series ended as a result – and, after a hysterical London concert in the spring of 1974 during which a fan was crushed to death, he decided to reshape his career and attempt to appeal to a more mature rock audience.

Signing to RCA, Cassidy enlisted the help of such reputable figures as ex-Beach Boy Bruce Johnston, Poco's Richie Furay, Mark Volman and Howard Kaylan (alias Flo and Eddie) and Harry Nilsson to produce the aptly-titled album *The Higher They Climb The Harder They Fall* (1975). But this, and his subsequent albums *Home Is Where The Heart Is* (1976) and *Gettin' It In The Street* (1977), revealed only an average talent and a dearth of ideas.

Cassidy had been a victim – initially a willing one – of an American entertainment industry that had long since realised that almost anything could sell provided the packaging and image was right and sufficiently exposed. The music had been secondary to swoony looks and hints of sex, and while some might remember those alluring eyes glinting from the LP cover or the TV screen, few were likely to recall the vacuous, bland and essentially worthless records Cassidy left behind. TOM HIBBERT

The Odd Couple

How the Mael brothers made Sparks fly

'THERE ARE SOME TERRIFIC records get out and that people just will not buy because of the image . . . for instance, Sparks. They were always one of my favourite groups: they had a man with a silly haircut, and that was great for one record – see the man who looks like Hitler. But three records on they're making really, really great singles and things, and lyrics that said a lot about what was going on, but no-one wanted to go into a record shop and buy something by a man who looked like Hitler. It was stupid.'

The comments of the Human League's Phil Oakey in 1983 highlighted the reason for the ultimate commercial failure of one of the most original pop groups of the Seventies. Significantly, Oakey himself had discarded his own 'silly haircut' shortly after the Human League broke through to a mass audience. But for all their awareness of the foibles, frailties and self-consciousness of others, Ron and Russell Mael of Sparks always seemed careless of the image they themselves were creating. They never realised when the joke – that of the beady-eyed weirdo with the slicked-back hair and toothbrush moustache giving piano accompaniment to the *castrato* pretty-boy singer – had worn painfully thin.

In 1981, seven years after they first stunned audiences with that bizarre juxtaposition of spooky inscrutability and winsome sex appeal, they still appeared the same. Visually, Sparks didn't have a clue how to develop beyond mere novelty value. Despite that, or maybe in keeping with it, they were masters of ephemeral pop, perfecting the trash aesthetic in a handful of tinselly singles and on at least one album.

Amateur hour

The Mael brothers were born in Los Angeles – Ron in 1949, Russell in 1951 – and were guided into showbiz at an early age by parents who put them on the stage. They went on to study film, graphics and English at UCLA and there in 1968 formed their first band, Halfnelson, with Ron on piano and organ, Russell singing and Earle Mankey playing guitar. The next two years were spent putting together demo tapes (many of the songs inspired by movies) until one attracted the Philadelphia singer-guitarist Todd Rundgren, who was then making his mark as a producer on the Bearsville label.

Signing them up, Rundgren produced the group's first LP in Hollywood with Earle's younger brother Jim coming in on bass and guitar and Harley Feinstein on drums. Released in January 1972, *Halfnelson* flopped miserably. The band changed their name to Sparks and re-released the LP under that title, but with the same result.

A European tour that ignited little interest was followed by a second album, *A Woofer In Tweeter's Clothing* (1972), on which the Maels began to find some creative form. The LP didn't sell well, but it did establish the quirkiness and continental preoccupations that would become Sparks trademarks. 'The Louvre', sung in French, 'Girl From Germany' (issued as a single years later in the UK) and a delicious soft-rock version of 'Do Re Mi' showcased Russell's voice, at this stage a silky, stylised lisp, which – a few octaves higher and more frenetic – would soon give Sparks their definitive sound.

Their eccentricity was always more likely to catch the imagination of British rather than the more staid American audiences, as the Maels discovered when they moved to Britain in 1973, quickly getting a recording contract with Island. In May 1974 they appeared on BBC-TV's 'Top Of The Pops', and no-one knew what to make of them at all. Russell's appeal was obvious and he subsequently became a teen pin-up mobbed by girls at concerts, but his uncoordinated dancing, allied to Ron's chilling sidelong glances over the top of his piano at the TV cameras, were very odd – enough to propel the peerless neurotic grandeur of 'This Town Ain't Big Enough For The Both Of Us' to Number 2 in the charts.

Sparks' finest three minutes, the song – a careering homage to pre-date anxiety – was ushered in by Ron's twitchily chiming piano, hit a sensational stomping beat with ricocheting gunfire and Russell's querulous falsetto, and was finally cut to pieces by Trevor White's scything guitar. For the rest of 1974, Sparks were a very big name, re-entering the Top Ten with 'Amateur Hour', another Sparks comment about adolescent sex, which climbed to Number 7.

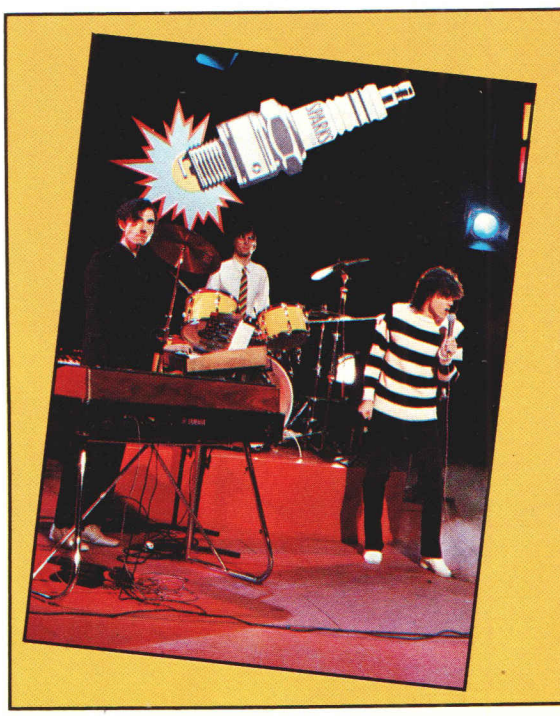
Punning pop

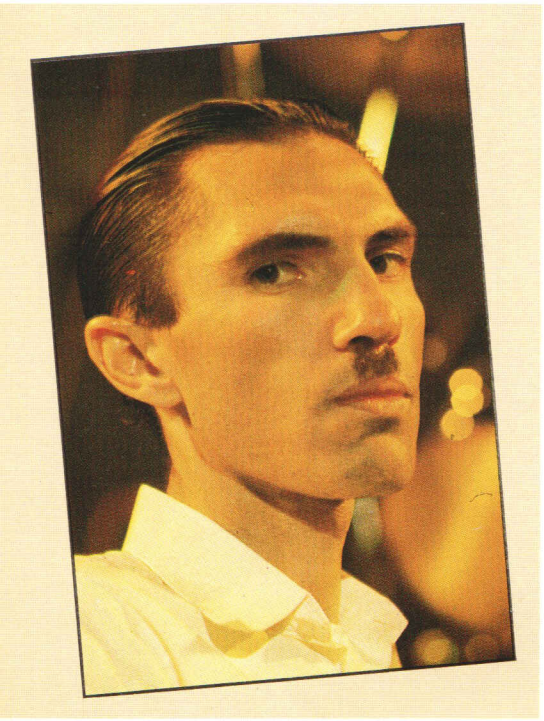
Both hits were taken from *Kimono My House*, a consummate pop album produced by Muff Winwood, with White, drummer Dinky Diamond and bassist Ian Hampton completing the new Sparks line-up. It was an ambitious affair bursting with finely crafted, highly literate and acerbic Ron Mael songs, the best of which, apart from the singles, were the shrill and insistent 'Equator', and 'Thank God It's Not Christmas' with its hypnotic ebb and flow, crashing chords and wry, ennui-inspired lyrics. *Kimono My House* reached Number 4 in the UK album charts in June, and it was as clever, thrilling and seductive as anything from that inventive late glam-rock era.

Sparks toured Britain in the autumn of 1974, proving nothing – for they were never a successful live band, restricted on stage by the apparent narrowness of their appeal – and released a new album, *Propaganda*, which repeated the *Kimono My House* formula and offered no fresh surprises. The band's chart places immediately began to slip: the LP reached Number 9; its single cuts, the comparatively subdued 'Never Turn Your Back On Mother Earth' and 'Something For The Girl With Everything', peaked in turn at Numbers 13 and 17.

Opposite: Sparks fly around the Mael brothers – Ron (left) and Russell. Above: Sparks in the Kimono My House *era. Below: In France in the late Seventies.*

The *Indiscreet* album of 1975 saw Sparks gently entering a transitional phase. The keyboards/falsetto blend still dominated, but Ron's writing and the arrangements showed signs of greater eclecticism. It was still an oddball collection: the marching beat and thunderous bass of 'Hospitality On Parade' standing alongside 'It Ain't 1918', a *Biergarten* hop with Russell sounding like Marlene Dietrich. The





Sparks
Recommended Listening

The Best Of Sparks (Island ILPS 9493) (Includes: This Town Ain't Big Enough For The Both Of Us, Never Turn Your Back On Mother Earth, Amateur Hour, Looks Looks Looks, Thank God It's Not Christmas, Get In The Swing, Something For The Girl With Everything).

singles taken from it, the classy Swing-era 'Looks, Looks, Looks' and the jolly 'Get In The Swing', barely scraped into the Top Thirty, however, while a sixth album, *Big Beat* (1976), sank without trace.

The Maels stressed their support for punk in 1977 but, unable to compete with it themselves, returned to America before moving to Germany and signing to Virgin Records. In 1979, they re-emerged with a reshaped sound courtesy of Donna Summer's producer Giorgio Moroder, who drenched Sparks in a disco tide. Ron's synthesisers now came to the fore and the phased, sophisticated Europop fizz of 'The Number One Song In Heaven' and 'Beat The Clock' lifted Sparks to Numbers 14 and 10 in the British singles charts; both surfaced on the *No 1 In Heaven* LP, which was more Moroder than the Maels.

Following a further collaboration with the producer on *Terminal Jive* (1980), the Maels returned to the old, familiar Sparks sound with the 1981 LP *Whomp That Sucker*, released on Why-Fi Records with US band Bates Motel providing backing. This contained more advice for young lovers in 'Tips For Teens' and saw the return of Russell's highly-strung vocals, for example on 'That's Not Nastassia' – seemingly a nod at film-star Kinski. This was the witty, wonderful Sparks of the mid Seventies, the image intact and eternally silly. In 1982 the Maels recorded an album, *Angst In My Pants*, on Columbia for US release, and recruited four new Sparks for live work. At last their satirical songs had begun to make an impact in the USA.

Sparks continued to fly, always likely to come up with a cheeky chart entry. Their influence may not have been widespread but their hits, especially 'This Town Ain't Big Enough For The Both Of Us', remained as immediate and exciting as when first released. The 1982-83 boom in electro-pop 'odd couples' – such as Soft Cell, Blancmange, Yazoo and Tears for Fears – saw a return to a format Sparks once seemed to have copyrighted, although the Hitler moustache remained Ron Mael's alone.

GRAHAM FULLER

Above left: Ron Mael's chilling Hitler glance. Above right: Russell at the microphone. Below: Sparks in the Eighties.

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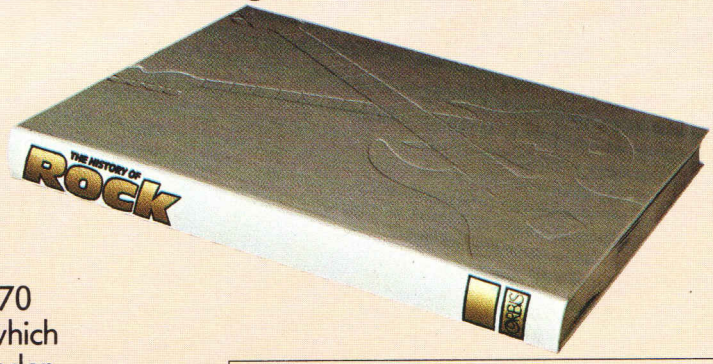

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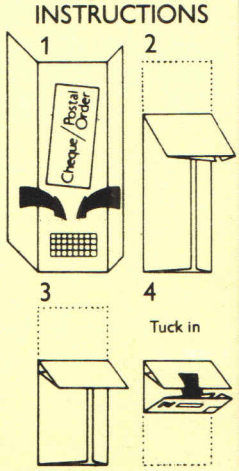

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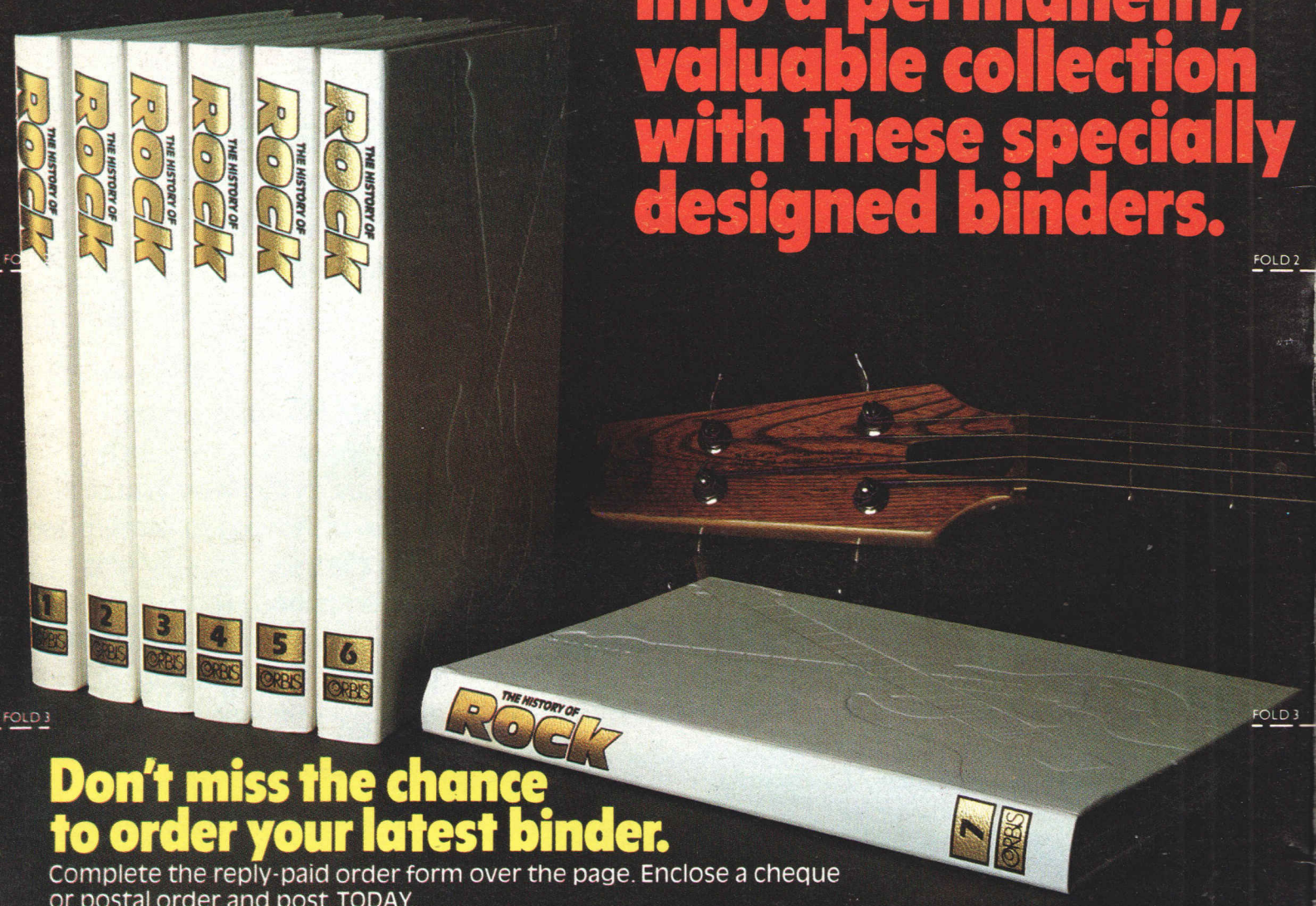

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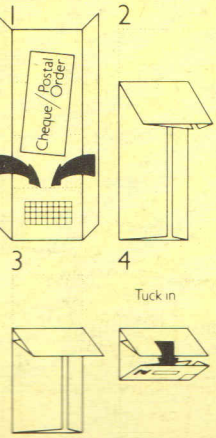

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